Depot Town Rag

Volume 23, Number 1

January
February
2008

Transportation tantalizes us

100% FREE *RAG* CONTENT

A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Old Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

Should we subsidize rail like highways and airports?

Will the trains be stopping here again?

-with some information from Peter Richmond in Parade magazine, November 2007

Will the trains start stopping in Depot Town again soon? In a feature/editorial in Parade magazine last November, Peter Richmond asked, "with high gas prices and airport delays, could we make our trains a better way to travel?"

Older business people in this block can remember when twenty-six trains a day stopped here during World War II and contemporary planners tell us of plans to bring back a rail commute between Detroit and Ann Arbor soon. Sentimental historians see it as a rebirth of an old tradition in the neighborhood while hard-headed realists say it would just be a couple hundred extra cars filling our lots with no shoppers roaming the neighborhood.

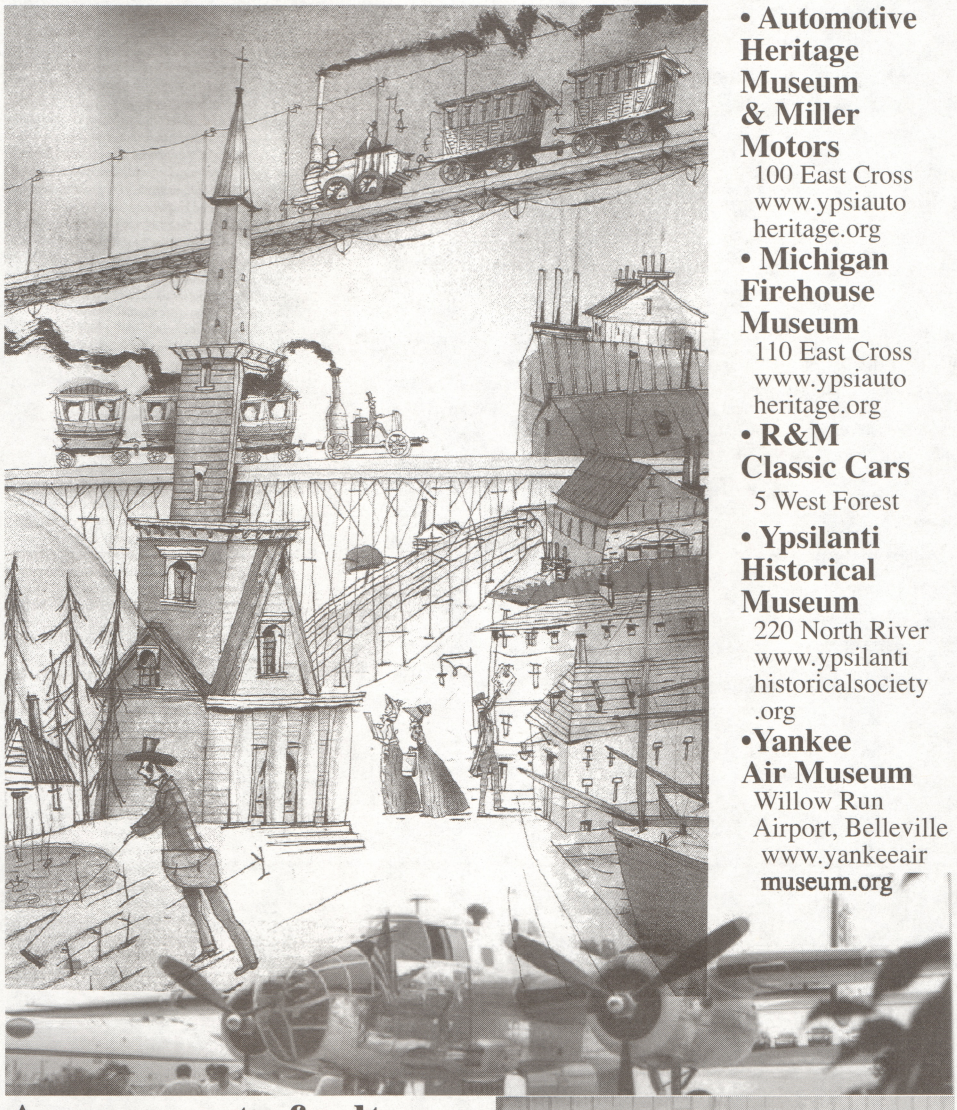
Whatever happens along the MCRR line in Ypsilanti, big changes may be in store for America's railroads in the next few years if the pressure being applied to our federal lawmakers has any effect. Last year, we spent nearly $3.7 billion on gas for our cars. Airport security lines were choked and take-off and landing delays became commonplace. Some say it's time to open up the old depot in Ypsi again.

Many point to a possible resurgence of rail travel, since trains use one-fifth less energy than cars or planes. Trains are efficient and tourist-friendly and they run in just about all kinds of weather but, since the 1960s, rail transportation has become almost irrelevant.

"The transportation mechanism is skewed toward highway construction," says James RePass, principal executive of the National Corridors Initiative, a transportation advocacy group. "The game is rigged against rail."

Our government's disdain for trains, says Peter Richmond, *[continued on page two]*

A moving story is told here



- **Automotive Heritage Museum & Miller Motors**
  100 East Cross
  www.ypsiautoheritage.org
- **Michigan Firehouse Museum**
  110 East Cross
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- **R&M Classic Cars**
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- **Ypsilanti Historical Museum**
  220 North River
  www.ypsilantihistoricalsociety.org
- **Yankee Air Museum**
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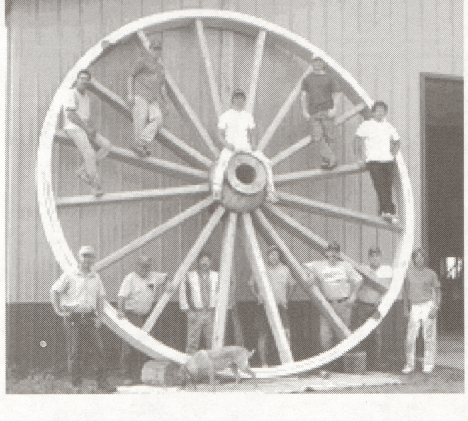
A museum to faulty transportation?

Did your ancestors' wagon break down in Ypsilanti?

If your mailbox is mounted on a wagon wheel from your great grand daddy's failed quest for the west—and you are prepared to continue that migration—the folks at Hansen's Wagon Wheel Shop in Letcher, South Dakota, feel they can make just about anything to order. See their crew at right.



1939 *horsepower* had several lives in Ypsilanti
Still in the stable

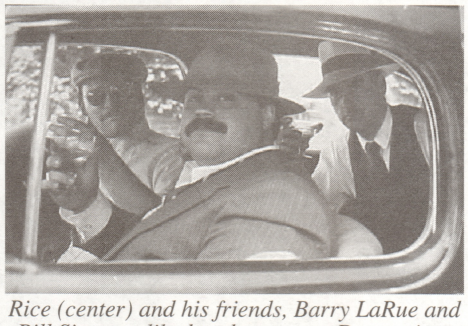
"When better cars are built, Buick will build them," said the popular slogan of the day—and when the swankiest Buick limousine was built in 1939, one of them wound up right here in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Buick postcard from the 1939 World's Fair

Some remember it was Hildegard Proctor who first owned the car, with Alexander Kronk as her chauffeur. The Proctors were heirs to a Chicago family with the Gulf Oil company. She may have sold the limo to Alex Longnecker—or he may have sold it for her—but locals remember Jenny Quirk Cornwell bought the limousine from Longnecker for $3750; Johnny Davis was her chauffeur. The Cornwells lived in the Tudor half-timber mansion on N. Huron, now owned by John and Pattie Harrington. Cornwell was the sister of Daniel Quirk and both families owned major businesses in the area. Punk Quirk believes his aunt died in 1959 at 100 years of age. After her death, the Cornwell limo moved on to Dr. Bradley Harris.

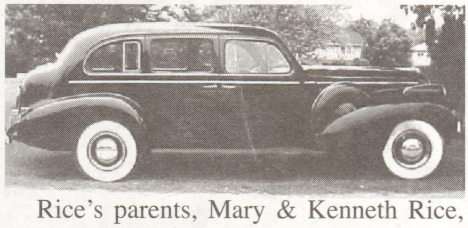
John Feldkamp of Saline was the car's next owner. He was once surprised to see the car heading out of town on a trailer but was able to retrieve it from the car thieves.

Dan Myers, an Ohio car collector, tried to buy it, but Feldkamp would not sell it at that time. He eventually did sell the locally famous limo to Tom Rice who brought it back to Ypsilanti and did some restoration on the vehicle.



Rice (center) and his friends, Barry LaRue and Bill Siemers, liked to dress up as Depression-era gangsters and drive vintage autos in the early Ypsilanti Heritage Parades. This photo was taken in 1982.

Tom Rice was killed in an auto/train collision in 1991 and his car—which was not in the accident—is pictured here at the grave site in Highland Cemetery.



Rice's parents, Mary & Kenneth Rice, bought the car from their son's widow, Tamara, and continued the restoration.

The car resided with Rice's mother until 2003 when she sold it to Antique Auto Sales in Monroe who had supplied vintage autos for the Forrest Gump movie. They subsequently sold the limo to Harrah's Las Vegas resort hotels where it still serves its original purpose—taxiing clients from the airport to the hotel.

Ypsilanti's celebrated limousine just keeps rolling down the streets with all the class of a dignified lady.

Rail travel *[continued from page one]*

began with FDR, who in the late 1930s turned his back on fat-cat railroad barons asking for federal handouts. Two decades later, President Eisenhower certified our commitment to cars when he built the interstate highway system.

Since then, federally funded Amtrak received just $1.3 billion last year, the same as 25 years ago. Highways were allocated $40 billion last year and airlines got $14 billion.

"I'm amazed at the rancor about our numbers—they're so small," says Alex Kummant, Amtrak's CEO. "It costs about $1.50 for every man, woman and child to sustain this network—one cup of coffee per person. Look at highway congestion, environmental issues, and the capacity of airline travel. For city-to-city transportation, we need passenger rail."

Now Congress is considering legislation that would allow the trains to rebuild. The Lautenberg-Lott Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act, designed to completely overhaul the system, may reach the Senate floor this session. The legislation would commit $10 billion over four years to develop high speed, short-haul rail corridors modeled on the European city-to-city routes. They could run between Detroit and Chicago once more.

"It's not a nostalgic thing, like, 'Let's save the old choo-choo,'" insists Lou Drummeter, a sleeping-car attendant on Amtrak's Washington-Chicago *Capitol Limited* for 20 years. "It's a 21st-century answer to our transportation problems. People want an alternative."

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Plenty of space for our ugly new cars, too

"Come by bike or train or car
You won't have to travel far..."
-from the popular song, The Depot Town Rag

First-timers to this rehabilitated district marvel at the bountiful parking.

"We came to see the old fire trucks and Hudsons," says a tourist from Dearborn, "and we could still find parking places for our ugly new cars!"

Another traveler, this time from far-away Ann Arbor, noted, "We couldn't find a multi-story parking structure, so we just parked our Volvo right next to a common domestic car on a surface-level lot. It was quite an experience for us."

With only twenty-four parking spots on the street, our neighborhood looks almost as authentic as it did when we allowed angle parking. But look beyond the obvious:

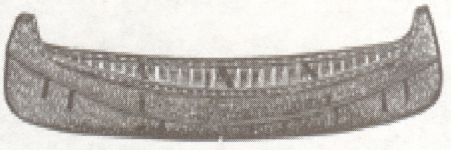
- 71 free parking spaces in the Frog Island parking lot
- 49 free parking spaces at the Market Plaza by the Freighthouse
- 63 more free parking spaces in the Depot parking lot
- 216 free parking spaces, in all!

...and dozens more in private lots surrounding the district for use by their clientele.

But there is one time when it's difficult to park here. During the Depot Town Summer Cruise Nights, hundreds of cars are on exhibit in the street and sightseers park outside the district and walk in. Driving cars down here to see cars down here seems to mollify the situation. Curb-to-curb smiles line the street.

It's upstream all the way to Ypsilanti: Atlantic Ocean, Hudson River, Erie Canal, Lake Erie, Huron River, Woodruff's Grove

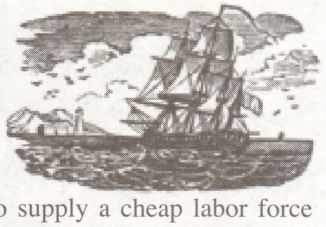
Our earliest tourists came by water



Contrary to popular perception, not much of the Native American travel around here was by canoe. Michigan was covered by swamps and its rivers were nearly impassable. What later became Washtenaw County was criss-crossed with single-file foot trails through armpit-high grasses.

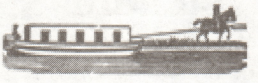
Many of Ypsilanti's first settlers came from Europe to such ports as Boston or New York and settled down for some time to earn the necessary funds to travel west.

Early accounts of their movement are found in U.S. census records, but many tell only what port they sailed from, not necessarily where they actually lived in Europe before they reached that port.



Not all came willingly, however. Slaves and indentured servants were as property to supply a cheap labor force for the rising agricultural economy in the young country.

Although many walked to The Great West or came in wagons pulled by oxen, those who had the wherewithal came via the Erie Canal from New York City to Buffalo.



Again, finances dictated the next lap. Some sailed west on Lake Erie–

–the earliest in sailing ships, later immigrants on steam-power lakers.

Ben Woodruff got stuck here and he stayed

Benjamin Woodruff and his compatriots poled the rest of their way up the Huron River and, when they could float no farther through downed trees, beaver dams, and underbrush, they made their settlement and called it "Woodruff's Grove." A year later, they moved to the Native American trail a mile north and eventually called it "Ypsilanti."

Welcome our newest *Depot Town Rag* supporters for 2008:

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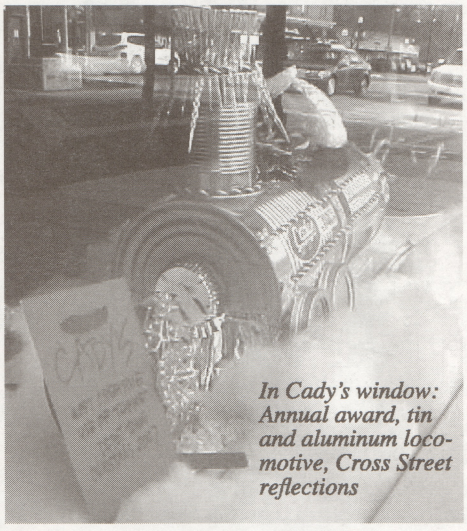
Room for one more?

Local businesses who did not get their copy in for the January/February issue of *The Depot Town Rag,* may still meet the March/April deadline on a sliding scale of payments. Please contact DTA Treasurer, Carole Clare by mid-February.

Depot folk still go window shopping—even in winter!

"Christmas Train" windows delighted shoppers



In Cady's window: Annual award, tin and aluminum locomotive, Cross Street reflections

Judging for the Christmas 2007 window dressings took place on December 1 and all agreed the "train" theme is so appropriate to our block that we ought to do it again and again. Watch for these and still more unique railroad/Christmas themes to appear in December of 2008.

• **Cady's Grill & Bar** showed a highly creative "train" made entirely of products left over from their commercial kitchen: tin cans, baking trays, and utensils—with hopper cars full of red and green pasta. Cady's new partner/chef Jerry Carpenter's wife Sue and daughter Carrie created the entire consist of aluminum and silver train cars *[shown above]*

• **Gordon's Five & Dime** always delights the eye of passers-by with their windows, this time with a child's Christmas fantasy of toys and candies—in pink, white, and silver

• **Ypsilanti Food Co-op's** hand-painted mural had a freight train coming around the corner of the Millworks Building with the Co-op logo on the front of the engine

• **Sidetrack Bar & Grill,** as usual, took high honors for the best inside/outside continuity of tradition holiday décor

Artful railroad themes appeared in many windows

• **Salt City Antiques** took the "train and antique radio" theme the furthest with their panoply of nostalgic artifacts

• **Apple Annie & Jim MacDonald** featured cut-out train cars across the façade and genuine antiques peeking over them

• **Nelson Amos's** painting of Amtrak gliding past the depot was artfully lighted and made the **Studio's** tiny window sparkle

• **Olde Towne Coin & Gold** featured a miniature railroad among their treasures

• **Enchanted Florist** ran a big oval model railroad layout all the way around the throne Santa used when he visited here

• **The Hair Station** showed off homemade miniature train, this one filled with beauty products

Other notable display designs included:

• **Queen of Hearts Pastries & Bakery** highlighted a table filled with examples of their gorgeous holiday cakes

• **Realkidz'** opened their first season with tiny Christmas trees in the window and a larger, lighted tree backing them up inside

• **Cheeky Monkey**, continued their year-round tradition of artfully lighted displays

In the next *Rag*:

A visit to "tree town" finds the shaded area may be closer than you thought. Also, big plans for Arbor Day activities will be announced

Depot Town Rag

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The Depot Town Association, Inc.

Gary McKeever, President
Merrill Guerra , Vice President
Carole Clare, Treasurer
Sandee French, Scy. & Past President
Website: www.depottown.org
DTA meets at 6:30 p.m on the third Wednesday of each month at Café Luwak, 42 East Cross Street.

Value found here

Ann Arbor News readers have discovered Ypsilanti, according to their December special supplement of Readers' Choice Awards:

Best place for a burger:
Bronze: Sidetrack Bar & Grill
Best restaurant outside Ann Arbor:
Silver: Sidetrack Bar & Grill
Best locally brewed beer:
Gold: Arbor Brewing Company
Bronze: Frog Island Brewing Company
Best soccer venue:
Bronze: Frog Island Park
Best community park:
Bronze: Riverside Park
Best radio station/music:
Gold: WEMU
Best hardware store:
Bronze: Congdon's ACE Hardware
Best place for Greek food:
Bronze: The Tower
Best thrift or 2nd hand store:
Silver: Salvation Army, 9 Park St.
Best festival outside Ann Arbor:
Gold: Ypsilanti Heritage Festival

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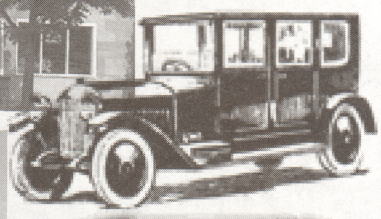
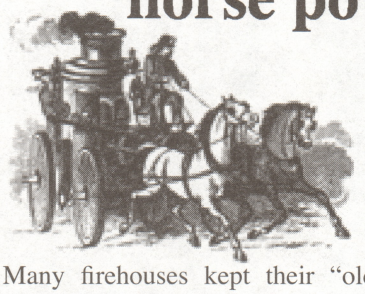
Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Collection

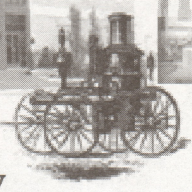


Early trades at the depot depended on horse power



Many firehouses kept their "old plugs" stabled long after the gas engine firetucks arrived. The north end of the Thompson Block was the fire department for Ypsi's east side with the pumper inside the front door and the horses stabled in the back half of the same bay. The fire hall at Cross and Washington was built to mollify the west-side acrimony.

Michigan Firehouse Museum



Ypsilanti Historical Museum

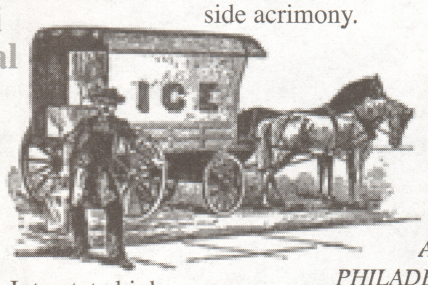
Our "keepers" are at a crossroads, literally

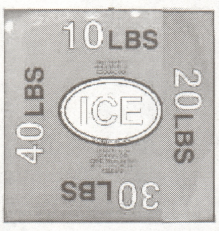
Ypsi folks save stuff and keep it for others to study, remember, and appreciate. Founded on the Native Americans' Great Sauk Trail, this town had vehicles of all kinds passing through. From wagon wheels to bombers, some of them parked here for eternity.

Detritus collects along the Huron River, the Great Sauk Trail, the Chicago Road, the Michigan Central Railroad, Michigan Avenue, and the Interstate highway. We keep it all—and we put it into displays for others to come and see it again.

The French explorer LaSalle canoed down the Huron but he left nothing for us to show off. Later immigrants came across the Atlantic in sail, sail/steam, and steam ships making entry at Halifax, Boston, New York, Baltimore, Charleston, and New Orleans. Some of them made it into the American mid-west and started naming their new towns after the ones they had left behind.

Over the years, folks left stuff behind right here in Ypsilanti—and a few enterprising individuals saved it, stuck it into small museums, and we can look at it any time we want.

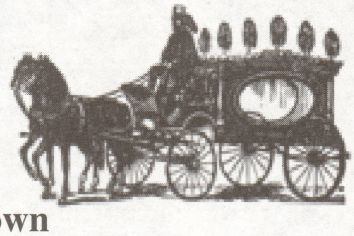




An ice delivery card from PHILADELPHIA ICE-COAL CO.

The ice man cometh

Ice merchants cut their product from the Huron River in winter, stored the blocks in sawdust-lined sheds, then delivered ice to household "ice boxes" throughout the summer. (Some of those kids still call their refrigerator an "ice box") Housewives posted a card in a front window noting how many pounds they needed for that day's delivery.



They were the last to let you down

Funeral parlors often doubled as furniture stores, since the woodworking skills for tables and caskets required the same medium and tools. The long projection of the east end of Cady's Grill is all that's left of our local undertaker's business, but the elevator for delivering caskets to other floors is still in place. At Halloween, employees like to tell of a crematorium in that space, as well [DTR, October 2007]

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You auto see it

We are fascinated by our various modes of transportation; they seem to mark our place in history. Ypsilanti's museums, auto and truck expos, and many festivals focus on how we get around and, down in Depot Town in the summertime, we close off the main thoroughfare to freeze the traffic just so we can take a few moments to walk around it and study it.

Summer's Thursday Cruise Nights are a highlight for all to see and the many antique car and truck shows in Riverside Park bring a wide range of transportation history back to Ypsilanti.

The district is book ended by the Michigan Firehouse Museum at the west end and the Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Collection at the other.

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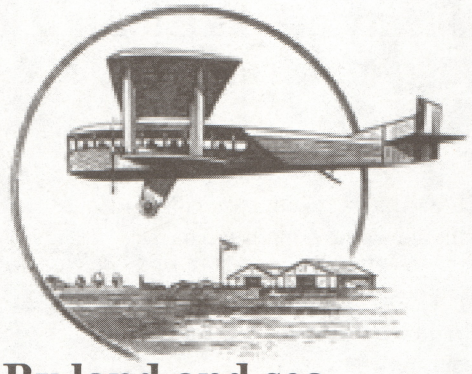

By land and sea ...and in the air!

Willow Run's Yankee Air Museum carries this community's history aloft with an exciting campaign to rebuild bigger and better than before the disastrous fire of October 9, 2004.

Willow Run Airport is just across the line in Wayne County, but that did not deter Henry Ford when he built the famous WWII Bomber Plant. The plant is in Washtenaw County and would have turned the Flying Fortresses out into Wayne County had not the wily developer of the assembly line designed a right-angle turn at the end of the line. The airport is in Wayne County, but many of the hangars and manufacturing plants are not.

The Yankee Air Museum is on the east side of the airport on Tyler Road, fully ensconced in the County of Mad Anthony Wayne with a Belleville address, but folks in Ypsilanti still consider it a vital part of their own community.

Directions: East on Ecorse Road to Tyler Road. Turn right (south) on Tyler. Hangar 2 is at your right as you enter the airport.

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